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ABSTRACT

Preservice teachers must learn about the media's impact so that they can educate their future students on how to become more savvy consumers and understand the negative effects of advertising. Students in every grade level can learn not to believe everything they read and see. Because teenagers hang out at malls, malls tend to capitalize on teenage trends, with advertisers reinforcing the importance of shopping as a leisure activity. Advertisers and malls try to create a comfortable, appealing place for teens and their families to spend time, offering a setting for teens that generates a sense of community. The action that the mall elicits most is for teens to spend their disposable income. In seeking ultimate trends and coolness, teenaged girls become increasingly marginalized in both advertising and their supposed need to shop. The invented self-concept provided by advertisers and the media is particularly damaging for young women (e.g., too-thin models). Advertising teaches young women that the body is a thing, a package, and that they must work to get their package looking right. It teaches young men a contempt for things feminine. English and history classrooms are a good place to incorporate education about the mass media. (SM)

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The Importance of Teaching Preservice Teachers to Interpret Media and Advertising

Katherine L. Hall

1999

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The Importance of Teaching Preservice Teachers to Interpret Media and Advertising

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Introduction

While standing in front of the classroom, teachers notice that their students are wearing many of the same brand of clothes. Let there be no doubt; as Tommy Hilfiger or the Nike swoosh are clearly visible on their clothing. Why do they choose the clothes and products that they do? Maybe their parents pick out their clothes? Or maybe the salesperson was particularly helpful? Doubtful. Students in the modern classroom are increasingly inundated with advertisements and the media lets them know what's cool; messages about what's in and what's out are part of the daily intake of students and that intake is happening in alarming numbers. The power of the media to deem what's cool moves our students away from performing independent analysis, and in fact, allowing them little free choice in their habits and choices. Students, like their teachers, are being constructed first and foremost as consumers.

As a teacher educator, these concerns are not just about students, but also about the students who will become teachers. It is increasingly important that preservice teachers learn about the media's impact so that they can educate their future students how to become more aware as consumers.

All teachers who have been in the profession for some time have no doubt noted the increase in the percentage of their students who work after school. Advertisers are also keen to this new trend. They now market specifically to this newest group of consumers. Channels like MTV gear their commercials directly to teens. Advertising instructional books brag that "It's entirely up to the advertisement—to you—to pull them, lure them, and cajole them" (Antin, 1993, p. 52). As $100 billion a year industry, advertising rules most of the decision making skills our students have in their teen years (Lazzarus, 1987 film).

As teacher educators, particularly of future teachers in history and English, work must be done to educate students of the impact of advertising on their lives. Teacher educators can teach them the skills to become critical consumers. Obviously, nothing can keep them from experiencing advertising; their teachers are not wizards after all. Advertising is massive because

it is everywhere. Even if our students take a stand and try not to be so consumer oriented, they will still be inundated with ads.

Teachers can educate students about the negative effects of advertising. This education should begin early in children's education. Students are affected earlier and earlier by suggestive advertising, so education needs to match its impact. Students can be taught how to recognize negative images and the ploys that advertisers use to convince consumers of certain behaviors to practice and mirror. This is now most often done in high school communications and journalism classes, but only a small percentage of the student population takes these classes. If these issues were addressed as units in English or History courses, then most students would become astute consumers. It is an excellent opportunity to utilize a variety of mediums in the classroom; of course advertising is in print, television, film…

Students in every class can be taught not to believe everything they read and see. Even when the researcher taught college freshman in composition, students more often than not did not have the skills to analyze and critique the readings that were presented to them. Somehow many students make it through school believing that anything that is in print or on television must be true. Students who are informed and aware consumers would be the ultimate in teaching them to be lifetime learners. For preservice teachers in particular, "Knowing what can prompt you to buy is a first step toward determining whether you really need or want a particular product or service and whether you can afford to pay for it" (Gay, 1992, p. 49).

Youth as Consumers

In the 1960's advertising began to get wise to their youthful consumers and in order to appeal to them, adopted youthful advertising that is now referred to as the "Creative Revolution" (Frank, 1997, p. 106). This was the beginning of what now has become its own market—advertising directed at teenaged consumers. Advertisers attempt to copy the hip language and utilize the popular music of teens in order to assure them that their product is cool. This in turn, if advertising directed at this age group is successful (which if you are one of the fashion giants is usually met with success, e.g. dollars), leads to a "must-have" mentality with teens.

Advertising, in all of its forms, conveys to students a sense of normalcy. It tells them who they are and who they should be (Lazzarus, 1987 film). Students are exposed to some 1500 advertisements per day: in their music, television, magazines, and now even in some schools

(Lazzarus, 1987 film). They can not escape the media's pull to tell them what is cool and what isn't.

Unfortunately, it is expensive to stay cool. No one sees many advertisements for dime store tennis shoes; tennis shoes that are in style now cost upwards of $100. Kids are still cruel, and if a teen cannot afford the new styles or what the kids think is cool this week, then other students will pick on them. There is no need to retell of such violent acts as assaults for tennis shoes; most are aware of this based on news reports of just such an incident several years ago in an urban school. But can teachers blame their students? If they are indeed saturated with over a thousand advertisements per day, they no longer make many freewill decisions as to what is popular and what is not. Unfortunately, consumers, particularly teens, are ignorant to the techniques of advertisers (Lazzarus, 1987 film).

The Mall as a Community

With all of the extra money that teens have from working and even sometimes from their parents, they will no doubt shop. Researchers have discovered that "Teenagers spend $55 billion annually on consumer goods and services, ranging from automobiles to groceries" (Gay, 1992, p. 40). And what better place to convene and shop than the local mall? Retailers are also well aware of this new population of consumers. It seems to be no accident that the favorite place for most teens to socialize is now the local malls. Mass media and advertising assure that shopping at the mall is cool. Advertising is "one of the major ways in which we learn our attitudes" (Lazzarus, 1987 film). From early on, young people are being groomed to place importance on material goods and to be good little consumers. In fact, advertising "to a great extent determine [s] our behavior" (Lazzarus, 1987 film) and this by no means excludes teens.

Certainly, malls capitalize on the new by teenage trends and "cool" products are in their hometown mall. Advertisers continually reinforce that "Shopping is the second most important leisure activity in North America, and although watching television is indisputably the first, much of its programming actually promotes shopping, both through advertising and the depiction of model consumer life styles" (Goss, 1998, p. 1). It is this modeling of ideals that convince teens that they must have a product. It can be anything that has been advertised as cool.

In order to make malls a comfortable and appealing place for teens and their families, malls seek to reinvent the sense of community that hometowns have lost. Advertisers and mall

designers have "exploited a modernist nostalgia for authentic community, perceived to exist only in past and distant places, and have promoted the concept of the shopping center as an alternative focus for modern community life" (Goss, 1998, p. 5). They even go so far as to landscape the interior of malls like that of the nostalgic downtowns or tropical vacation spots. In creating mall spaces in which to lure consumers, "Advertisers draw upon knowledge of places, and upon the structuration of social space, to create an imaginary setting that elicits from us an appropriate social disposition or action" (Goss, 1998, p. 3).

The action that the mall elicits most is for teens to spend their disposable income. The malls are portrayed by advertisers as appealing, comfortable and safe places to shop. Popular teenager-aimed stores work to "persuade us that our 'self-concept' as well as social status is defined by the commodity" (Goss, 1998, p. 3). It works especially well with teenagers since they are at the age where already their hormonal changes provide a fragile self-esteem, more often than not, teenagers are often oblivious that "designers seek to environmentally condition emotional and behavioral response from those whom they see as their *mall*eable customers" (Goss, 1998, p. 11).

And certainly not all of this marketing is aimed at the working adult consumer. Just look at the most popular chain stores in the mall: Express, The Limited, Structure, Victoria's Secret, Lerner, and Bath and Body Works all seek to provide material goods for youth. The ominous thing about even this short list of stores is that the same corporation owns them all and that they all seemingly target a teenaged audience.

Malls also work to provide a setting for teens to generate their sense of community. This is a place that they can access without much difficulty. A mall offers "a third place beyond home and work/school, a venue where people, old and young, can congregate, commune, and 'see and be seen'" (Goss, 1998, pp. 7-8). Many teens do indeed work, congregate, and socialize in the mall. Much to the dismay of parents and "older people" who find crowds of teens in their local malls, teens have determined many malls to be the "cool" place to hangout. Most of the retailers have picked up on this gathering of teens at their front door. They use youthful images in their storefronts, offer foods that appeal to teens (hamburgers, tacos, and other sandwiches, for instance), give them a place to see movies, and even provide record and video games for their consumption. It is not to say that older consumers do not frequent these retail outlets, but it is easy to see that the advertising and in-store marketing target the 13-19 year olds. It is

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unfortunate that educators, and in particular teens, "overlook the fact that the shopping center is a contrived, dominated space that seeks only to resemble a spontaneous, social space" (Goss, 1998, p. 11).

It is doubtful that students know the schematics and plans that advertisers have for a mall. When looking at an American history course, for example, the curriculum could incorporate the mall's history and its impact on American society. It is believed that students are more interested in things that are applicable to them and if teachers consider the mall is where most teens hang-out, then you can not get any closer to something that is meaningful to them.

For English teachers, there is a plethora of ways to look at the mall as it truly is. For writing assignments, students could spend time simply observing behavior at the mall or maybe interview employees about their perceptions of the mall. Either of these can be incorporated into students' writing both in and out of the classroom. Interviewing and observation also serve as other communication skills that are required in many curriculums. Also, students can do a series of journal entries about advertising that is directed at encouraging teens to visit the mall—frequently. Students will be using the highest of critical thinking skills and also become more aware of the environments in which they socialize.

Self-images Resulting from Advertising

In seeking the ultimate trends and coolness both in and out of the mall, teenaged women become increasingly marginalized in both advertising and their supposed need to shop. Indeed "the exploitation of women's social insecurities [which started with mass media to begin with] by the commodity aesthetic, [shows that] the stereotypical shopper is female—in fact, 67 percent of shopping center users are female" (Goss, 1998, p. 2). The irony in this unequal percentage of shoppers is that if there are teen women around, teen men will come.

The invented self-concept provided by the media is particularly damaging for young women. The airbrushed, too thin women that model the clothes that young women "must have" can not be duplicated in the "real world" outside of advertising. Young women are living increasingly "in a world that is fabricated for them" (Goss, 1998, p. 4). Teenaged women are especially affected by implied meanings or inferences that "are defined as meanings that are not explicitly expressed in the message but that may be logically or pragmatically derived from the message" (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1987, p. 15). Adverfisers insist (oftentimes inferred or implied as

opposed to asserted) that a product must be purchased not only to make a teen feel that they fit in, but also to make a young woman feel attractive and desired. This false sense of need is particularly detrimental for young women who are trying to find themselves and develop a solid self-esteem. Advertisers work hard by having their "Routine Proposition perceived as a promise to make people somehow more important, more daring, or more romantic—more whatever it is that people might *yearn to be* instead of just plain themselves" (Antin, 1993, p. 166). What exactly is wrong with girls just being plain themselves? Again, girls and boys are being reconstructed by advertising; they are being trained as consumers in every aspect of their lives.

At an early age, girls learn the ideal of women's beauty from advertising (Lazzarus, 1987 film). This ideal beauty is undoubtedly portrayed as one of flawlessness (Lazzarus, 1987 film). How can any woman expect to be flawless? Women internalize these myths created by the media and consequently are never happy with that which they have to work.

Certainly there can be room made in the history and English classrooms to explore these myths. In a history class, students can trace the history of "beauty" and how it is defined. This researcher can think of ideas such as how they could discover the differences between, say the 1930's and 1940's compared to current day. Historically they would be able to construct projects about how advertising has changed in this century alone. Students could examine advertising from a variety of mediums; perhaps this can even include wartime propaganda where the "perfect" woman was a significant part of wartime posters.

In an English classroom, close attention could be paid to critical analysis of ads. Students could conduct studies of print, television, or music advertising. It would make interesting class discussion (perhaps a whole unit) to look at the way advertisers sway students into buying their products. This seems also to be an ideal way to use cooperative learning in an English classroom. In groups, students could come up with analyses of their choice of advertising medium and make presentations to the class.

Gender Roles

The advertisers convey to young women that the body is a thing, a package, and that she must work to get her package looking right (Lazzarus, 1987 film). This working on the "perfect package" lures young women to buy cosmetics, sexy lingerie, and diet products, just to name a few. Looking at over a thousand ads per day, young women try to develop their sense of self.

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When they are most fragile and most vulnerable, "Advertisers try to convince people that buying certain goods and services will help fulfill their higher needs" (Gay, 1992, p. 40). It is seemingly a quick fix to a very complex problem.

What this false sense of security leads to is women that who still feel insecure about their looks and in worse case scenarios, women who develop eating disorders from early misconceptions about beauty. For college aged women, for example, one out of five has an eating disorder; eighty-percent think that they are overweight (Lazzarus, 1987 film). This quest for the "perfect look" begins in young girls and continues into adult womanhood. For young women in particular, "the distinction between illusion and reality has become problematical or entirely collapsed" (Goss, 1998, p. 4). Advertisers insist that consumers understand their ads and that they are not really taken to heart. The problem with this logic is that often subliminal messages such as those related to the ideal beauty do sink in.

But just looking closely at an advertisement does not mean that a young consumer ignores the deeper meanings. For example, a thin woman smoking a thin cigarette is an example of what is misunderstood to mean to the teen that smoking equates to thinness. Advertisers argue that they are not trying to effect deep meaning within an individual, but this is no doubt a lie (Lazzarus, 1987 film). In fact, "attention to a communication does not automatically translate into comprehension of this communication. Rather, the receiver brings a storehouse of past experience and an ongoing set of expectations to each communication transaction and may interpret, or misinterpret, communications in terms of these pre-existing mental phenomena" (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1987, p. 131). In most cases, teen women are over sensitively aware of all of the cues around them to be pretty, smart, sexy... Their internalized expectations for womanhood are reinforced daily by the advertisements that they encounter. Advertisers are in the business of selling products, at any expense. Advertising is a "media of mass communication, employing rhetorical devices to effect hidden persuasions; [it] may be experienced passively; ...[it] belong [s] unobtrusively to everyday life; and [it is] motivated by profit" (Goss, 1998, p. 4).

Young women are not the only teens who feel the negative effects of advertising. Teenaged men are also adversely affected. Young men often have developed their sense of self according to what the advertisers want them to perceive themselves as. Men are not supposed to be weak; they are to be the dominant forces in the world. This idea of the dominant male portrayed in advertising concurs with the patriarchal reality that it is a part of society—men are

in charge. As with teenaged women, young men do not recognize on the surface the roles that advertisers are expecting them to play. Derived misconception frequently occurs which "stems from combining full and accurate comprehension of some meaning with the non-comprehension of others" (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1987, p. 52). In other words, young men may recognize, for instance, that they will look cool if they wear a particular type of jeans. Yet, they do not realize consciously that they believe if they wear the jeans, they will have scantily clad, sexy women around them like in the advertisement that encouraged them to buy the jeans in the first place.

Advertising also teaches young men a contempt for things feminine (Lazzarus, 1987 film). As a consequence of advertising that boys experience early in life, they learn to believe that they are a "sissy" or "weird" if they like things that are considered girlish things. This also conveys into the idea of not liking to show their emotions because sensitivity is still equated with femininity. When boys see advertisements that discourage feminine-like behaviors consistently, they "form communication beliefs not only regarding the message content but also regarding all other message features... the source... [and] the medium" (Jacoby & Hoyer, 1987, p. 48).

With a shared communication from ads for girls, "Sex appeal is another strong motivating force" (Gay, 1998, p. 41). Boys want to look good for girls. Although not as large an industry for male teenagers as female teenagers, cosmetics, clothes, and other fashion accessories are advertised to make a boy feel manlier. Indeed, "Advertisers frequently try to convince consumers that buying a particular brand of shampoo, cologne, toothpaste, jeans, or car will make them more physically appealing to others" (Gay, 1998, p. 41).

If any group or individual student chooses to stay non-consumerist, other students will consider them deviant. Students already have a difficult time with peer pressure and the likelihood of them becoming non-consumers is pretty slim. Students who claim to be non-conformist still often copy their styles from musicians or other fashions they have seen in mass media.

For teachers in English and history, this may be the hardest unit to teach because of its sensitive nature. Students are very sensitive to their level of coolness, their bodies, and how they fit it in the world. Teachers will probably find students denying that advertisers remake their appearances or that they are not "self-constructed." They probably also have a hard time believing the male and female stereotypes of advertisements. Students do not like to think that they are controlled by anyone. But, the researcher thinks that in either a history or English class,

a teacher can carefully construct video or print presentations of advertisements to demonstrate to students the way gender is represented in advertising. Certainly using advertisements that are for products that students use regularly will help to bring the point home.

Conclusion

Although the researcher is aware that there is no way to address all of the ways that teacher educators can model teaching for their preservice teachers, these are some of the ways that may initiate the dialogue. Most teachers are concerned about students' ability to use critical analysis effectively. Advertising, clearly, is one of the most important and ominous forces in our students' lives. At such a vulnerable age, students who are discovering themselves—their identity, their sexuality, their beliefs—are being constructed by a media that does not hold these things dear, but instead wishes to worship the all mighty dollar. As teacher educators, we can both teach critical thinking skills and encourage preservice teachers to become more informed consumers; these are lessons that can last a lifetime.

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